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TS. 186025-a

24 May 1967

DRAFT

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Communist Responses to Alternative Programs  
of Bombing North Vietnam

ALTERNATIVE A: To concentrate the bombing of North Vietnam on the lines of communication in the Panhandle Area (Route Sectors I, II, and III) and to terminate bombing in the remainder of North Vietnam unless there occurred reconstruction of important fixed targets which have been destroyed by prior raids or unless new military activities appeared.

1. This course of action would substantially reduce the chances of increased military or political pressures on the US from both China and the Soviet Union. The Chinese, of course, would probably put the most extreme construction on such a change in US policy. They would attribute it primarily to a lack of will in the face of rising domestic and international criticism and to a general frustration in the US over its inability to bring the war to a successful conclusion. The Chinese, therefore, would almost certainly advise Hanoi that having scored an important gain, the North Vietnamese had even greater incentive to persist in their current strategy of protracted war.

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2. At the same time, neither Hanoi nor Peking could be certain that the US would maintain restrictions on the bombing, and there would be a continuing apprehension that the US would once again resume attacks north of the 20th parallel. There would also be some suspicion, particularly in Peking, that the US had taken the move to prepare the groundwork for a diplomatic effort to persuade Hanoi to make peace. Though such suspicion is ever present in Peking, the US shift in bombing strategy might add to Sino-Vietnamese friction, though not probably to any significant extent, unless and until the US did make some specific moves to exploit the change in bombing pattern.

3. Moscow would be relieved that the US had broken the cycle of escalation. The Soviets too, would be inclined to construe the US move as a concession to pressures at home and abroad. They would probably also recognize, however, that the US might have valid military reasons for concentrating bombing on the logistics funnel. And the Soviets might also conclude that the chances that the US would persist in a long ground war in South Vietnam had actually improved if the criticism of the bombing program receded.

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4. At some point, probably after the new US policy had been confirmed in practice for several weeks, the USSR might become somewhat more active diplomatically in trying to promote talks. Exactly what they might do would depend in part on the timing of the move and on what other diplomatic actions accompanied or followed it. We doubt that Moscow would go very far in trying to persuade Hanoi that there was<sup>a</sup> political opportunity to work for <sup>the</sup> end to all bombing. More likely, would be a Soviet effort to convince the US that a complete termination of the bombing would produce a negotiating situation with Hanoi.

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ALTERNATIVE B: To terminate the bombing of fixed targets not directly associated with LOCs in Route Sectors VIa and VIb (i.e., northeastern Vietnam) and simultaneously expand the armed reconnaissance operations in those Sectors by authorizing strikes on all LOCs, excepting only those in an eight-mile circle around the center of Hanoi and an eight-mile circle around the center of Haiphong. This program would include continuous strikes against MIG aircraft on all airfields. Further, the program involves two variations:

- (1) <sup>prohibition on</sup> strikes against ports and port facilities;
- (2) or a program which includes every effort to deny importation from the sea.

5. The policy outlined in the first variation of the alternative would create a highly ambiguous situation for the Communists to draw any precise conclusions/<sup>as</sup>to the general trend of US policy. It would become apparent that the US was avoiding certain fixed targets and the Hanoi and Haiphong vicinities. But at the same time, the intensity of bombing of LOCs would be increasing and the attacks on all the airfields would represent an extension of the bombing program. Hanoi and Peking and Moscow would probably read this US action as an intensification of the air war.

6. It is unlikely, however, that this program would cause any radically new or different political or military responses from the USSR or Communist China. Their main efforts, as before,

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would be to provide the necessary support to Hanoi to maintain a flow of supplies and a strong air defense. The Chinese would probably reinforce their anti-aircraft and logistical forces along the rail line from Hanoi to Dong Dang. During this bombing campaign it is also possible that the USSR would provide more effective weapons for the defense of North Vietnam.

7. The principal danger of a greater Chinese military involvement would probably arise from the bombing of the airfields. The North Vietnamese would try to continue air defense operations for as long as possible. But the time might come when the conditions of the fields made operations too difficult or virtually ineffective. At that point, it is possible that the North Vietnamese would want to transfer operations to bases in China. We think it probable that the Chinese would not want to accept the risks to their own territory from such operations. But at the same time they could not allow North Vietnam to remain defenseless. Thus, some compromise might be arranged in which North Vietnamese aircraft and pilots shuttled back and forth from Chinese bases to airfields in North Vietnam if and when they became serviceable.

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8. Regardless of whether the North Vietnamese sought a sanctuary of some kind in China, there would be a continuing danger of air incidents near the Chinese border or over Chinese territory. Recently, the Chinese have been more aggressive in their responses; and this seems likely to continue, as the nature of US air operations involve a chance of extending over Chinese territory. As for the USSR, we would not exclude the surfacing at some point of some Soviet military personnel in a "volunteer" role. In any case increased Soviet and Chinese support would probably have the effect of reinforcing Hanoi's determination to persevere in its policies despite greater pressures on supply lines to China.

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9. The most important additional effect of this course would be the direct challenge it posed to the USSR. The Soviets might consider countering the interdiction by military actions, or bringing pressures on the US or its allies in other areas (say Berlin). But these two courses seem too hazardous or

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unpromising. It is much more likely that the main Soviet response would be to continue supplying Hanoi, transportation arrangements with China permitting, and to put maximum political pressures on the US. They would try to mobilize world opinion on the issue of blocking free passage of all shipping, and depending on Hanoi's attitude would consider taking the matter to the UN. In addition, they would be likely to take other diplomatic actions which would demonstrate the damage to US-Soviet relations across the board.

10. Nevertheless, as the crisis intensified, there is a good chance the USSR would make a stronger effort toward a political solution, urging the course of negotiations more vigorously than they have heretofore. But they probably would still not be willing to make Hanoi's acceptance of talks an explicit condition of continued material support.

11. China. The interdiction of North Vietnamese ports would not in itself compel the Chinese to undertake new military actions. It is highly unlikely that the Chinese would enter the war at this point. It is likely, however, that the Chinese commitment to support Vietnam would be strengthened. If requested, the Chinese might introduce some combat troops

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in North Vietnam. The net result of this program would be to place China in a more influential position in Hanoi, since the remaining lines of supply would be under their control. The main thrust of China's growing leverage and influence would be directed toward persuading Hanoi to continue the fight.

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